

**STATEMENT OF**  
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**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

**December 12, 2017**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member O'Rourke, and other Members of the Subcommittee. I am Robert Worley, Director of Education Service, and I am pleased to be here with you today to discuss the implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017 (Colmery Act), or as it's more commonly referred to, the Forever GI Bill. Accompanying me today are Mr. Lloyd Thrower, Office of Information & Technology (OI&T), Account Manager, Benefits Portfolio, and Mrs. Charmain Bogue, Deputy Director, Education Service, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

**Colmery Act**

On August 16, 2017, the President signed into law the Colmery Act (Public Law 115-48), which includes the most comprehensive changes to GI Bill benefits since enactment of the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act (Post 9/11 GI Bill) in 2008. Specifically, the Colmery Act enhances access and availability to educational benefits for eligible Veterans through several

technical adjustments, calls for investment in information technology (IT) systems, and fundamentally changes the way we view the GI Bill. The Colmery Act has become known as the Forever GI Bill because of its most recognized feature – the removal of the 15-year time limitation for Veterans who transitioned out of the military after January 1, 2013, and eligible dependents, to use their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits. The law also restores benefits to Veterans impacted by school closures since 2015, and expands benefits for certain Reservists, surviving dependents, and Purple Heart recipients among other improvements.

The importance and complexity of the Colmery Act led VA to establish a Program Executive Office (PEO) comprised of business-line managers, management analysts, individuals with program and project management experience, and contract support. The office is responsible for monitoring and coordinating all Forever GI Bill implementation activities. VA also awarded a 12-month Program Management contract in September to provide the PEO with expertise in IT, training, and communications.

Twenty-two of the law's thirty-four provisions require significant changes to our IT systems. OI&T is committed to providing a solution to the most pressing of these – Sections 107 and 501 – which change the way VA pays monthly housing stipends by aligning payment to the location where students physically attend the majority of their classes and removing the one percent reduction exemption on GI Bill stipends.

An IT solution for these sections is part of VA's commitment to continue automating the education claims process and delivering timely payments to Veterans and beneficiaries. The importance of this cannot be overstated – since fiscal year (FY) 2013, VA has processed an

average of four million claims per year. In FY 2017, the average time to process all education claims was approximately 25 days for original claims and nine days for enrollment certifications.

To support the additional claims VA anticipates as a result of the Colmery Act, and to assist with the standing up of new initiatives like the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, VA is establishing specialized teams with experienced claims processors and is reallocating more senior staff to account for increased workload. In addition, VA has begun hiring 200 temporary employees in the field who are expected to be on board by May 2018.

### **Date of Enactment Provisions**

VA has taken significant steps in the four months since the Colmery Act was enacted to implement thirteen provisions that were effective immediately, and has begun a multifaceted outreach campaign to highlight and promote the changes to Veterans and beneficiaries.

In November, VA conducted extensive outreach through social and traditional media outlets. On November 19, VA held a Forever GI Bill Twitter Town Hall that reached over 170,000 users. VA has also been leveraging its GI Bill Facebook to share updates, highlighting the removal of the delimiting date for using Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits, its new authority to restore entitlement in the event of school closures, and the permanency of the work-study program. On the web, VA created a new site that is regularly updated with information, resources, and Frequently Asked Questions for provisions with the most immediate impact on Veterans and beneficiaries, such as the expansion of independent study programs.

VA sent two mass e-mails to 1.2 million stakeholders emphasizing what changes have been made, and what further changes are coming as additional provisions, including those giving Purple Heart recipients full entitlement to the Post 9/11 GI Bill and extending the Yellow Ribbon

Program to Purple Heart and Fry Scholarship recipients, go in effect on August 1, 2018. VA briefed stakeholders such as School Certifying Officials and representatives from Veterans Service Organizations on the Colmery Act and encouraged them to help VA get the word out about GI Bill enhancements. On November 29, VBA's Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity conducted interviews with 23 radio and TV stations reaching millions of viewers. By all accounts, the interviews were positive and well received. These interviews presented yet another opportunity to discuss the Colmery Act and its impact on Veterans and beneficiaries, and also encouraged all interested Veterans and dependents to contact VA for more information on Education benefits.

VA had already started working on those provisions taking effect upon enactment, so that Veterans and beneficiaries could take advantage of the expanded benefits. VA also notified nearly 8,000 beneficiaries that they may be potentially eligible for restoration of entitlement under a Special Application provision. To date, VA has received and processed over **250** applications and restored entitlement to **192** beneficiaries. VA is committed to restoring entitlement to all eligible Veterans and beneficiaries and encourages those who may be eligible to apply at [www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/ForeverGIBill.asp](http://www.benefits.va.gov/GIBILL/ForeverGIBill.asp).

VA has started to notify nearly 3,200 Veterans, who lost their Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) eligibility due to the program's sunset, that they now have the option to make an irrevocable election to have their eligible active duty service periods used to establish Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility. Affected Veterans are receiving information and guidance on what the election means to their benefit entitlement and future use, and are given the option to have VA contact them if they need further assistance before making an election.

The most notable and recognized change by the Colmery Act is the removal of the 15-year time limitation to use the GI Bill benefit. This is a powerful statement to millions of Veterans that education and training is the key to their economic future today and tomorrow. Recognizing this, VA OI&T is working closely with Education Service to review and update all outgoing letters and material that features a delimiting date, so that Veterans and beneficiaries are properly informed of the lifetime benefit.

VA also performed a data analysis of Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship recipients, and found that three beneficiaries in FY 2017 and eight in FY 2018 would no longer see that entitlement expire as a result of the Colmery Act. VA contacted each of these individuals to explain the steps to continue to use this benefit.

The provisions mentioned above were the most impactful to Veterans and beneficiaries, but numerous others also required immediate VA action. VA is still assessing the provision concerning the amount to provide State Approving Agencies (SAAs), and will support the GAO study on SAA funding and approvals. VA has also notified SAAs that they may authorize independent study programs at certain educational institutions that are not institutions of higher learning, like career and technical education schools.

In November, VA announced 12 new members to its Veterans Advisory Committee on Education, to be chaired by former U.S. Senator James H. Webb and co-chaired by Jared Lyon, the President and Chief Executive Officer of Student Veterans of America. The Colmery Act extends the Committee's authority to FY 2022.

VA is compiling and analyzing data on student progress and will soon deliver an implementation plan outlining IT system improvements to maximize the automation of educational claims processing.

In order to provide information on whether schools offer priority enrollment to Veterans, Digital Services is partnering with Education Service to collect school data for display on the GI Bill Comparison Tool.

VA's Compensation Service has also identified an initial group of Veterans that may now be eligible for disability compensation because of full-body exposure to nitrogen mustard gas or lewisite during World War II, and is establishing a work-group to process these claims.

A few provisions of the Colmery Act align with policies and procedures already in place. Examples include codification of the VetSuccess on Campus program, allowing Veterans participating in the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program to extend eligibility if called to active duty in certain cases, and providing School Certifying Officials additional flexibility when a course start date does not align with that of an academic term.

### **Looking Ahead**

VA is working hard to successfully implement the Colmery Act in a prudent and timely manner, but a great deal of work remains with 18 of the 34 provisions. VA has already started revising regulations, articulating communications plans, and building operational models toward smooth and functional implementation.

VA looks forward to continuing to work with members of this Committee and the Congress on these efforts.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. We look forward to responding to any questions from you and Members of the Committee.